

restless longing for some solitary company by middlecyclone

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Summary:

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It's the lingering looks that get Steve in the end. It could have been any of several other things: the kisses on the cheek, the way their hands brushed as Nancy hands Jonathan a pen, the way Jonathan beams at her, every morning, transforming his face from sullen to ecstatic—but it isn't any of those things. It's the looks. He understands it, really, he does—setting a horrific eldritch terror on fire will bring anyone together. It's a bonding experience like that.

The thing is—Steve knows that's the kind of thing that brings people together, but he's starting to realize that his definition of together might not be quite the same as Nancy and Jonathan's.

he doesn't mind Nancy and Jonathan being friends, he tells himself, he really doesn't. If they want to sit together at lunch and work on English homework after school, that's fine, that's none of his business. But the *looks*! If he had to look over one more time during trig and see Jonathan staring dreamily at the back of his (his! his as in *Steve's*) girlfriend's head—well.

Fear brings people together, Steve knows, but the thing is—well—it hadn't just been Nancy and Jonathan that night. He'd been there too.

It all comes to a head on a crisp January morning. There's a thin layer of fresh snow on the ground, stark white with a crispy sparkleslick sheen on top; the sun is glaring down bright and sharp but the air is still so cold that it burns going into Steve's lungs as he gets out of his car and walks into Hawkins High.

He goes to his locker and starts peeling off the outer layers of his winter gear: gloves, then hat, then jacket. He turns to start grabbing notebooks out of his backpack, and then he sees it. Then he sees Jonathan.

It's a crisp January morning, and Jonathan is watching Nancy longingly as she stands in front of her locker and carefully unwinds her heavy knitted scarf from around her neck, and Steve simply cannot take it anymore.

He shoves his bag into this locker, slams the door shut with a metallic clang, and stalks over to where Jonathan is still staring devotedly at Nancy.

"Just ask her out already," he snaps in Jonathan's ear, "if you like her that much," and Jonathan startles and turns to look at Steve.

"I would," Jonathan says, after a long pause, softly but pointedly, "if you weren't already dating her."

Steve widens his eyes, faux shocked. "Oh wow, you're right," he says snarkily, "I'd totally forgotten that Nancy was my girlfriend—oh wait, no I hadn't. Back off, Byers."

Jonathan scoffs in disgust. "You know, I'd started to think you weren't actually that much of an asshole," he says, "but I guess I was wrong." He slams his locker door and tries to walk away, but Steve reaches out and grabs his wrist before he can get very far.

"Hey," Steve says, "I know you like her."

"Yeah," Jonathan hisses, "I really, really do. But she picked you, and I've been respecting that, I've been staying out of your way, I haven't done anything wrong. I can't just—turn off my emotions like a lightswitch, okay? But I'm trying."

Steve feels incredibly guilty, suddenly. "Yeah," he says, "okay. Sorry."

Jonathan blinks. "What?"

"I'm sorry," Steve repeats. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm just—jealous, I guess, but that's my problem, not yours."

"Oh," Jonathan says, "you really are a decent human being now, aren't you?"

It's not the kind of question that calls for an answer, but Steve shrugs at him anyway. Jonathan is, he's suddenly realizing, kind of—well. Certainly not traditionally handsome, no, but oddly attractive nonetheless. There's something appealing in the tilt to his eyes, the slope of his nose; Steve isn't sure what, specifically, but definitely something.

“You can—let go of me now,” Jonathan says, and Steve looks down, startled to find that his fingers are still wrapped around the other boy's wrist. He lets go immediately, but it's like there's a static charge between them all of a sudden, crackling. Steve can feel his fingertips tingling where they'd been touching.

Steve makes a choice. Like most of his choices, it could be better.

“Follow me,” he says, and Jonathan—God knows why—does.

They go outside, behind the cafeteria. Jonathan shivers in his denim jacket, useless against the bone-deep cold of a Midwest winter. Steve knows, objectively, that he should probably be cold too, in only a thin cotton shirt and his jeans, but he doesn't feel anything.

He doesn't feel anything, except—

“What the hell are we doing out here?” Jonathan snaps, huddling into his jacket, tucking his hands against his sides. “If you wanted to talk, we could talk inside—”

“I didn't want to talk,” Steve says, and steps forward, and kisses Jonathan.

It starts, like most kisses, with one pair of lips against another. Jonathan is taller than Nancy, than all the girls Steve has ever kissed; he's wider, too, bulkier. It's not—bad, it's just different. He's taller, wider, but his lips feel the same.

Except Nancy has always kissed Steve back, every time, and Jonathan is just standing there, hands at his sides, back against the brick wall of the school. He's not pushing Steve away, but he's not kissing back, until he is, and then it's—well. Then it's Jonathan's icy hands sliding up the back of Steve's shirt. It's Steve's tongue in Jonathan's mouth,

Jonathan's teeth dragging down Steve's bottom lip; it's both their bodies pressed together from waist to shoulders, stubble scraping against skin, breath condensing around them as they kiss, and kiss, and kiss.

The bell rings.

"Jesus fuck," Jonathan says, "what was that?"

Steve doesn't say anything.

"Seriously, Steve—"

"Do you want me to be sorry?" Steve says, finally. "Because I'm not sorry, at all, but I could be if you wanted me to."

"Not really," Jonathan says, easily, "I want to know exactly what you think you were doing."

"Well, that's easy," Steve says, "I was kissing you."

"And Nancy?" Jonathan asks, and raises an eyebrow.

"Well—" Steve starts, and then stops, and then thinks. He remembers all the times when he caught Jonathan staring at her longingly, and then remembers all the other times he caught Nancy staring longingly back. "I'll talk to Nancy," he finishes.

"Hey," Steve says, "you like Jonathan, right?"

Nancy blinks, then stares at him, expression cool and calm but a telltale pink flush creeping up the sides of her neck. "Well, obviously," she says evenly, "we're friends."

"It's okay, Nan, you can cut the bullshit," Steve says, and tucks a

wayward strand of her hair behind her ear. “I like him too.” Nancy doesn’t react visibly, but Steve knows her, knows to watch her eyes for her reaction, and he catches a telltale flicker of startled confusion in her eyes before it smoothes out.

“You should kiss him sometime,” Steve says, “I know you want to. It’s fine.”

“I’m with *you*, Steve,” Nancy says, annoyed. “I picked you, alright? I picked you, and I’m not going to change my mind.”

“What if you didn’t have to pick, though,” Steve presses, “what if you could have both of us?” He stops then, and takes a deep breath. “This isn’t a hypothetical,” he adds. “I’m really asking, if that’s something you would want. Because it’s something I want.”

“You want Jonathan,” Nancy says flatly.

“I kissed him this morning,” Steve confesses. “I know it was—wrong, cheating, not good, but—it didn’t feel like cheating. It felt like—like you should have been there.”

“You *kissed* Jonathan,” Nancy says incredulously. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Steve says.

“You’re serious about this,” Nancy says.

“Yeah,” Steve says.

“Okay,” Nancy says, “let’s go kiss Jonathan.”

They go kiss Jonathan.

Well, no. They try to go kiss Jonathan. What actually happens is they end up in the Byers’ living room while Jonathan’s mom putters around the kitchen trying to make tea.

"It's fine," Nancy says, for probably the tenth time, "we don't need tea, really."

"Please don't make us drink tea," Steve mutters under his breath, "please, God, please."

Nancy steps on his toe, hard. Joyce Byers comes back with tea.

"Jonathan should be back soon," she says, for probably the tenth time, "he'll be so glad to see you both!"

"Of course," Nancy says, polite as ever. "How is Will?"

"Oh, he's... he's great," Joyce says. "He-ah—"

The front door slams open. It's Jonathan, wearing his work uniform with his camera slung around his neck. "Mom—" he says loudly, and then sees Nancy and Steve, and then freezes. "Nancy," he says weakly. "Hi."

"Hi to you too," Steve says, with a sarcastic wave.

"Hi, Steve," Jonathan says. He doesn't look at Steve. He's staring at the ceiling.

"Your friends are here," Joyce says, unnecessarily.

"Yeah," Jonathan says. "Let me-uh-change, and then do you want to-come to my—"

"Sounds great," Nancy cuts him off, and then sips her tea. Her facial expression doesn't change in any way, but Steve can tell she hates it by the way she blinks, hard, too long, and then sets her cup down on the table in front of her.

He takes a sip of his own tea, out of morbid curiosity. It's terrible.

Jonathan disappears into his bedroom for a few minutes; Steve can hear the quiet sounds of clothes falling to the floor as Jonathan undresses, and then the less-quiet sounds of clothes being kicked under the bed as he tries to neaten up at the last minute.

The door opens. “Uh—” Jonathan says, “do you—”

Steve doesn't wait for him to attempt to finish that sentence, and abandons his tea and sidles quickly down the hallway to Jonathan's room. He judiciously steps over the scorch mark in the carpet as he goes, Nancy right behind him. Jonathan closes the door behind the three of them, and Steve can feel the memory of the last time the three of them were in this room like a punch to the stomach. He doesn't like the way it feels, not at all, so he makes it go away.

By kissing Jonathan again.

This time, he's got his hands on Jonathan's face. He can feel that Jonathan's closed his eyes by the way his eyelashes flutter against Steve's cheeks, and he can hear Jonathan's breath catch in the quiet of his bedroom.

And then it's over. “What the fuck,” Jonathan says flatly. “Steve—Nancy—”

Nancy just smirks. “Carry on,” she says lightly, “don't mind me, boys.”

“I told you I would talk to Nancy,” Steve says. “Well, I talked.”

There's a beat of silence. Steve reaches out and grabs one of Jonathan's wrists. Nancy steps toward them and takes the other one.

“So,” Nancy says, “what do you say?”

“I didn't think you were fucking *serious*,” Jonathan says, staring at them.

“Well, I was,” Steve says. “Serious at a heart attack.”

“You both want me,” Jonathan says dumbly. “You both still want each other, and also me, for some stupid fucking reason.”

“It's not stupid,” Nancy says. “We like you. And if you don't like us, well, that's fine, we can just leave then. But I'm pretty sure you do like us, and you're just being really stupid right now.”

“So maybe try not being so stupid,” Steve advises.

“Shut up, Steve,” Nancy and Jonathan say in unison.

“Yes,” Jonathan says, eventually, breaking the silence, and then turns bright red.

“Thank God,” Nancy says, and then, “my turn,” she adds, barely louder than a whisper, as she raises herself on tiptoes and leans in to kiss Jonathan. It’s so much gentler than the way Steve was kissing Jonathan, but at the same time, there’s so much more feeling in it. Steve looks at them together and feels—raw, almost; shocked by how much he cares about both of them.

Nancy pulls back, and Steve reaches over and tucks her hair behind her ears. “Yeah?” he asks her, and *only* her.

“Yeah,” she tells him, with a small smile.

Steve looks down at Nancy, and she’s staring at Jonathan—long, lingering, the same kind of stare that started this all in the first place. But for once, he realizes with a shock, Jonathan isn’t looking back at her. He’s looking at Steve.

There are some experiences that bring people together, Steve thinks, but staying together? That part is a choice.